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ABSTRACT

While attributions have traditionally been viewed as social cognition variables, some researchers have proposed that individual differences exist in attributional patterns and that these patterns are differentially related to and predictive of various behaviors. A study was conducted to examine the question of attribution style as a trait-like individual difference variable. Crucial to construct validity is the issue of cross-situational consistency of behaviors/responses. A recent study (Cutrona, Russell & Jones, 1985) found only weak evidence for consistency using an attribution measure of stability, internality, and globality. The present study employed the Student Attribution Survey (SAS), a 64-item measure of four types of attribution: Ability, Effort, Task Difficulty, and Luck. Items on the SAS are differentiated by type of attribution, outcome valence, and situational context. The SAS was completed by 464 college students. It was hypothesized that the factor structure would be determined by attribution type and valence, but that situation would not be a significant aspect. Results of factor analysis yielded factors that were defined by attribution type and valence. Only two minor factors were situation specific. These results support the construct of attribution style, at least for hypothetical events. Implications for attribution theory, applications, and future research needs are presented. (Author/NB)

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Attribution Traits Versus Situations:

The Cross-Situational Consistency of Attributions

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Abstract

The present study was designed to examine the question of attribution style as a trait-like individual difference variable. Crucial to construct validity is the issue of cross-situational consistency of behaviors/responses. A recent study (Cutrona, Russell & Jones, 1985) found only weak evidence for consistency using an attribution measure of stability, internality, and globality. The present study employed a 64-item measure of four types of attribution: Ability, Effort, Task Difficulty, and Luck. This measure has three features: type of attribution, outcome valence, and situational context. It was hypothesized that the factor structure would be determined by attribution type and valence, but that situation would not be a significant aspect. Results of factor analysis (n = 464) yielded factors that were defined by attribution type and valence. Only two minor factors were situation specific. These results support the construct of attribution style, at least for hypothetical events. Implications for attribution theory, applications, and future research needs are presented.

Attribution Traits Versus Situations:

The Cross-Situational Consistency of Attributions

While attributions have historically been viewed as social cognition variables, a number of investigators (Abramson, Seligman & Teasdale, 1978; Beck, Rush, Shaw & Emery, 1979; Dweck, 1975; Ickes & Layden, 1978; Metalsky & Abramson, 1981) have argued that individual differences exist in attributional patterns and that these patterns are differentially related to and predictive of various behaviors. This growing theme is most commonly referred to as the study of attributional styles (Metalsky & Abramson, 1981). This construct suggests that persons develop characteristic patterns of causal explanation for events and behavior that are stable within individuals and function as personality trait variables. Metalsky and Abramson (1981, p. 38) thus define attribution style as "a tendency to make particular kinds of causal inference, rather than others, across different situations and across time." Others (Brickman, 1978; Orvis, Cunningham & Kelley, 1975) continue to assert that attributions vary more across situations than across individuals. From this normative view, it is expected that persons with access to the same causal data will arrive at similar attributions for a given situational context. Attributions are held to be situation specific rather than cross-situationally consistent. This difference in views is

immediately recognizable as yet another example of the continuing larger debate regarding the influence of traits versus situations in explaining and predicting behavior (Alker, 1972; Bem & Allen, 1974; Mischel, 1968).

In support of the former, situational view, a number of studies have demonstrated persons' abilities to attend to, process, and logically derive causal inferences from available data (McArthur, 1972, 1976; Orvis et al., 1975). Many situational factors have also been shown to influence attributions (Kelley & Michela, 1980; Weiner, 1980). Information about social norms (Frieze & Weiner, 1971), past instances of similar situations, salience (Taylor & Fiske, 1978), and recency (Nisbett & Ross, 1980) have all been demonstrated to affect attributions. In support of the personological view, a variety of studies has been conducted that attempts to assess attributional style and correlate this with other personality variables and behaviors. Relatively consistent patterns of attributions have been found and related to self-esteem (Ickes & Layden, 1978), test-anxiety (Metalsky & Abramson, 1981), depression (Seligman, Abramson, Semmel & von Baeyer, 1979), and achievement motivation (Weiner & Kukla, 1970).

A recent review and test of cross-situational consistency (Cutrona, Russell & Jones, 1985) questioned whether attributional style exists as a valid trait construct. Based on a confirmatory

factor analysis of the Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ; Peterson, Semmel, von Baeyer, Abramson, Metalsky & Seligman, 1982), they concluded that there was only weak factoral evidence for a cross-situationally consistent attributional style. This finding was contrary to Hammen's (1981) suggestion that high consistency should be found in attributions for hypothetical events, particularly because little situational data are available for these. One alternative explanation for Cutrona et al.'s (1985) nonconfirmatory results reflects the instrument used more than the theory of attributional style. The ASQ's measured attribution dimensions are stability, locus, and globality. By themselves, these do not yield statements of cause (attributions) but rather information about the cause of various events. What is measured, then, is how people construe causes, not the causes they identify. The question of attributional style may better be assessed by using an instrument which yields a measure of the extent to which persons make different kinds of causal statements about events.

One model which specifies such an attribution typology is Weiner's (1972) achievement based attribution model. In this model the dimensions of stability and locus are combined to produce four types of causal statements: Ability, Effort, Task Difficulty and Luck. These attributions may be invoked for both positively and negatively valenced events and behavior. An assessment of cross-

situational consistency based on this alternative model may provide further clarification of the usefulness and validity of the attributional style construct.

My purpose in the present study, then, was to evaluate the cross-situational consistency of attributions through factor analysis of an attribution measure derived from Weiner's (1972) model. It was hypothesized that the factoral structure of attributions would be determined by the type of attribution (Ability, Effort, Task Difficulty, Luck) and valence of outcome (Positive, Negative) rather than the situational context of the event or behavior in question.

Method

Participants

Participants in the study were 464 college students, representing 16 departments at the undergraduate and graduate levels of a Midwestern university. The sample included 273 females and 191 males. Seven subjects made errors or omissions in completing the instruments; their data was excluded from analyses.

Measure

The attributional measure used for the study was the Student Attribution Survey (SAS), developed by the author for an earlier study. The SAS is a 64-item measure which presents 16 hypothetical, but common, events across six situational contexts

(Academic, Social, Occupational, Theater, Athletic, and Interpersonal) and two outcomes (Positive, Negative). Four statements accompany each event description representing Ability, Effort, Task Difficulty, and Luck attributions. Respondents indicate the importance each attribution plays as an explanation for each event on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "All important" to "Not at all important." Items on the SAS are thus differentiated by three characteristics: attribution type, outcome, and situation. The SAS is typically scored by summation of responses to items that yields scores on eight subscales: Ability/Positive (AP), Effort/Positive (EP), Task Difficulty/Positive (TP), Luck/Positive (LP), Ability/Negative (AN), Effort/Negative (EN), Task Difficulty/Negative (TN), and Luck/Negative (LN). This scoring provides a picture of attributional style based on the pattern of scores on the subscales and assumes cross-situational consistency. In previous usage, the internal consistency of the SAS subscales averaged r=.80, while test-retest values averaged r=.74.

Results

As stated earlier, it was hypothesized that the factor solution obtained for the SAS would consist of factors defined by attribution type and valence, and that situations would not significantly contribute to explained factor variance. Data were

analysed using Principle Components factor analysis, with orthogonal Varimax rotation. The number of factors was allowed to vary freely. Table 1 presents the obtained factors, items loading on each factor, and also the item means. For each item, the attribution type, outcome, and situation represented are also indicated. A factor loading criterion of .40 was used for inclusion in a factor. Items which cross-loaded in excess of .40 are designated by noting the number of the other factor on which they loaded.

The PC factor analysis yielded 15 factors which together accounted for 61% of the variance in the original correlation matrix. From Table 1 it is evident that seven of the first nine factors reflect the expected attribution type-by-outcome structure that corresponds to the subscale scoring. The remaining eight factors include several that reflect unique item contents unrelated to their designated subscales.

Factor I is clearly a Luck, though it just as clearly does not differentiate Positive and Negative outcomes. Evidently, persons' luck attributions are not influenced by the valence of the event outcome. More importantly, however, is the fact that all of the six situational contexts are represented by at least one item on this factor. This indicates that luck attributions are consistent across these contexts, rather than situation specific. Factor II

is an Effort/Positive factor, differentiated by both type and outcome valence dimensions. Five of the six situations are represented on this factor. Factor III is an Ability/Positive factor and includes five contexts. Factor IV was labeled Task Difficulty/Negative, covering four situations. Factor V is Task Difficulty/Positive and incorporates all six contexts. Factor VI is Effort/Negative with four situations represented. Factor VII is apparently a second Effort/Positive factor and is more situation specific, covering interpersonal and social contexts. Factors VIII and IX are both Ability/Negative factors and have different situations represented within them. Factors X through XV are all non-meaningful single-item factors that are not interpretable but may warrant a review of item contents. While not a primary focus of the study, inspection of the item means reveals some substantial differences in response tendencies for the different attribution factors.

Conclusions

Results of factor analysis of a 64-item attribution style measure, based on Weiner's (1972) achievement model, provided substantial support for cross-situational consistency of attributions for a number of hypothetical events. The primary factors identified include most or all of the contexts and are defined, as hypothesized, by type of attribution and outcome

valence, not by situation. Later factors did differentiate to some extent between social/interpersonal events and the others, but these were minor factors accounting for 2% or less of the explained variance. Overall, situational variability in item stems did not account for any significant amounts of factor variance.

These results support theoretical models that suggest a dispositional tendency to make characteristic attributions for a variety of events and behavior (Metalsky & Abramson, 1981). It must be noted that the SAS, as do other measures, uses hypothetical events that represent "minimal information patterns" (Kelley, 1972) and that this is when one would expect attribution style to be manifested. When specific causal data are available and emphasized, people use a more formal reasoning process that leads to more situation-specific attributions (McArthur, 1972; Orvis, Cunningham & Kelley, 1975). The current study suggests that when causal data are unavailable, people will indeed invoke habitual attributions that vary with outcome and between persons but not across situations. Whether these are a function of memory for recent similar actual events or "what if" is a question that needs to be addressed.

These results are also contrary to Cutrona et al.'s (1985) findings with the ASQ. As noted, this difference may reflect the choice of attribution models and measures; it is difficult to

separate a construct from its measures. The results of this study provide one counter instance, and it remains to be seen whether a situational or trait model of attributions better describes the naive scientist. As with other examples of the trait or situation debate, it is likely that an interactional model is needed to fully represent the attributional process. Research is needed which systematically varies the extent to which events, situations, and outcomes are hypothetical or actual. A related issue that warrants study is under what circumstances people do in fact conduct a causal search or make more automatic trait-like attributions. Further study of the correlates of attribution style are also needed. Applications of attribution theory (cf. Frieze, Bar-Tal & Carroll, 1979) to dysfunctional behavior and its treatment are increasing, and the issue of style versus situational determinism is central to this area. Finally, a number of other social cognition variables, such as schemata, heuristics, attention, and encoding/decoding processes (Fiske & Taylor, 1984), might be used in future research to enrich the models available and provide a more complete, complex picture of the attribution process. Somewhat ironically, the study of the naive scientist, a common sense psychology (Heider, 1958), is anything but simple.

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Table 1

Factors, Items, Means, and Loadings for Student Attribution Survey (n = 464)

I (Var. = 15%)						II (Var. = 13%)					
Item#	Att.	Out.	Sit.	h	$\bar{X}$	Item#	Att.	Out.	Sit.	h	$\bar{X}$
54	L	P	SO	.735	1.6	34	E	P	AC	.767	4.4
19	L	P	VO	.732	1.8	37	E	P	AT	.728	4.4
44	L	N	AT	.732	1.6	6	E	P	AC	.667	4.4
62	L	P	IN	.722	2.3	24	E	P	TH	.660	4.4
52	L	N	AC	.708	1.6	18	A	P	VO	.636	4.3
36	L	P	AC	.701	1.5	20	E	P	VO	.618	4.4
12	L	N	AT	.651	1.6	47	E	P	SO	.448	4.2
39	L	P	AT	.631	2.1						
45	L	P	SO	.570	2.3						
7	L	P	AC	.539	2.0						
29	L	N	VO	.508	1.4						
22	L	P	Th	.508	2.3						
27	L	N	SO	.493	1.7						
13	L	N	AC	.463	2.0						
58	L	N	IN	.451	2.5						
III (Var. = 5%)						IV (Var. = 4%)					
21	A	P	TH	.705	3.5	16	T	N	AC	.626	3.1
35	A	P	AC	.698	3.3	10	T	N	AT	.611	3.1
38	A	P	AT	.606	3.7	51	T	N	AC	.599	3.0
48	A	P	SO	.600	3.6	31	T	N	VO	.577	2.3
55	A	P	SO	.546	3.0	4	T	N	SO	.526	2.5
64	A	P	IN	.486	3.8	43	T	N	AT	.505	2.6
8	A	P	AC	.486	3.4						

table continues

V (Var. = 3%)

Item#	Att.	Out.	Sit.	h	$\bar{X}$
53	T	P	SO	.708	1.9
46	T	P	SO	.648	2.3
40	T	P	AT	.558	2.2
23	T	P	TH	.540	2.1
63	T	P	IN	.527	2.4
17	T	P	VO	.491	1.9
33	T	P	AC	.401	2.5

VI (Var. = 3%)

Item#	Att.	Out.	Sit.	h	$\bar{X}$
25	E	P	SO	.717	3.7
42	E	P	AT	.663	3.4
32	E	P	VO	.552	4.1
49	E	P	AC	.547	4.1
11	E	P	AT	.449	3.4
14	E	P	AC	.434	4.2

VII (Var. = 3%)

61	E	P	IN	.697	3.4
59	E	N	IN	.688	3.3
47	E	P	SO	.481	4.2
56	E	P	SO	.473	3.8

VIII (Var. = 2%)

28	A	N	SO	.631	2.5
26	T	N	SO	.600	2.0
50	A	N	AC	.424	2.5

IX (Var. = 2%)

41	A	N	AT	.753	2.9
9	A	N	AT	.526	3.4
57	A	N	IN	.366	2.7
30	A	N	VO	.347	3.4

X (Var. = 2%)

5	T	P	AC	.721	2.3

XI (Var. = 2%)

1	E	N	SO	.749	2.6

XII (Var. = 2%)

60	T	N	IN	.589	2.8
63	T	P	IN	.508	

XIII (Var. = 2%)

13	L	N	AC	.442	2.0

XIV (Var. = 2%)

3	A	N	SO	.816	2.4

XV (Var. = 1%)

2	L	N	SO	-.550	1.9

Att. = Attribution: A = Ability E = Effort L = Luck T = Task Difficulty

Out. = Outcome: P = Positive N = Negative

Sit. = Situation: SO = Social VO = Vocational AC = Academic AT = Athletic TH = Theater IN = Intrapersonal